

## News Release

# Local Students Helps Produce Poinsettia Crop

By Krista Lemos on Thursday, December 21, 2006

Christmas began in September for a group of six students at the University of Minnesota Crookston (UMC).

As members of UMC's "Commercial Floriculture Crops, fall" class, Laura Culver, Maple Grove, MN; Aimee Grosam, Brownsdale, MN; Jessi Fandrich, Richardton, ND; Traci Richter, Bertha, MN; Aaron Motl, Staples, MN; and Dan Bjornson, Arvilla, ND, began working with the Horticulture Department's annual poinsettia crop at the beginning of fall semester.

UMC's Horticulture Department offers the commercial floriculture class in order to acquaint students with producing plants for a specific date. This is a necessary skill for employment in a greenhouse or garden center operation. Poinsettias form their colored "flowers" only if the length of days and nights are carefully regulated, according to Melinda McVey McCluskey, assistant professor of horticulture at UMC. "The poinsettia really doesn't have a bloom like most flowers. Instead, the colorful red, pink, or white petals are modified leaves known as bracts. The real blooms are those small yellowish clusters in the center."

Nine hundred rooted cuttings from a specialized propagator arrived in late August, and students potted them during the first week of class. Some are planted three to a pot, some single and some in hanging baskets. The class began lighting the plants from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. immediately after potting to encourage optimum growth and to delay flowering until December. Poinsettias would bloom naturally in November.

In October the students started the process of forcing the plants to bloom in time for the Christmas holiday season. Students covered the plants with a dark cloth at 4 p.m. and uncovered them at 8 a.m. each day to control the length of daylight. The students also take care of greenhouse chores on the weekends.

In addition to the more traditional red varieties, the 2005 crop includes the variety "Shimmer Surprise" which has speckled leaves, and "Plum Pudding" which has purple leaves. Most growers will grow 80-90% red, as the market demands. The class grows 500 red poinsettias and 400 of other colors so that they can experience working with the more unusual varieties.

Although the class is taught by Sue Jacobson, horticulture instructor, the crop is in the hands of the students. The work and production of the poinsettia crop is entirely the responsibility of the class. As instructor, Jacobson often lets problems develop to see how the students will solve them—something they'd have to do in an employment situation. The class demands hard work, dedication, and a strong team effort to grow the best poinsettias. Leadership and responsibility are two of the qualities that develop in this type of teaching and learning environment.

"I believe in the constructivist theory of teaching and learning," says Jacobson. "That is that students learn from experience. By growing the crop themselves, making all of the decisions, seeing the results, and being responsible for the outcome, these students will never forget this course. The experience is great training for working as part of a production team. We are privileged to be able to offer this type of student experience here at UMC."

The class is excellent training for a career in horticulture, now a multi-billion dollar industry in the U.S. According to the Minnesota Nursery and Landscape Association, Minnesotans spend 17 million dollars on potted flowering plants each year, and significant growth in sales and horticultural employees is forecasted in the next five years.

For more information on UMC's horticulture program, contact the Horticulture Department at 218-281-8118, or check out UMC's website.

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